

Zionism, multiculturalism and the construction of Irish-Jewish identity

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the construction of Irish-Jewish identity, through the prism of the Ireland–Israel soccer match in 2005. While, under the terms of ‘celebratory multiculturalism’ Irish Jews were able to use joke-work to bat away the implied loyalty test of ‘which side are you on’, the pro-Palestinian political mobilisation on the day of the match was more problematic. Within the narrative of Irish Zionism, these pro-Palestinian activities were linked to antisemitism, an interpretation which alienates Jews from those left-liberal elements in Irish society most open to a reading of Jewishness as part of a multicultural Ireland and re-inscribes Jews as ‘a people apart’.

Introduction

Growing up among Irish Jewish classmates, we sometimes asked ourselves the question: ‘If there was a war between Ireland and Israel, which side would you support?’ The answer was invariably the same: ‘Israel – because they’d win’. It is the contention of this paper that both the question and the form of answer – like much joke-work – was not just a throwaway comment but a means of constructing a self-critical communal sense of identity, common among minority groups (Bhabha, 1998). Specific to this group, it is an illustration of the relationships which Irish Jews negotiate with other Irish people (for a similar example: Lentin, 2003).

On 4 June 2005, I was fortunate enough to witness a war of sorts take place between the two countries in the form of an international football match at Lansdowne Road, Dublin, which ended in a 2–2 draw. The discourses surrounding the match encapsulate many of the issues surrounding Irish-Jewish identity and the problematic role of Zionism in constructing that identity. This paper, while based on a wider research project, focuses on the match. The aim is emphatically *not* to find out which side Irish Jews supported, but what the question itself and how it is answered tells us about the place of Jews within Ireland.

I first outline the historical development of Irish Jewry which has led to a growing sense of belonging to Ireland – a sense which allows Jews to deflate the

implied loyalty test of ‘which side would you support.’ However, this Irish–Jewish identity has increasingly incorporated a sense of being Zionist, an element which led many to see pro-Palestinian demonstrations on the day as little more than a manifestation of antisemitism. The article concludes by questioning what this tells us about the place of Jews in Ireland, the uses of antisemitism, and the limitations of multiculturalism.

The paper is based on a mixture of interviews, documentary analysis and participation. For sampling purposes, I define an ‘Irish Jew’ as someone who participates in Jewish activities, has been living in Ireland for a number of years, and considers him/herself an Irish Jew. I adopt this definition as it is inclusive and allows for self-ascription, yet also highlights the participative, communal nature of identity. I interviewed seven people, and so my aim was clearly not to provide complete saturation of the Jewish community; another feature of my sampling was the theoretical sampling model, identifying those people most likely to provide noteworthy rather than simply representative data. Through a mixture of snowballing and targeting, I sought to draw upon a diverse range of voices. The purpose of these interviews was not to acquire facts about Irish Jews but rather accounts of their subjective experiences, in order to understand the process of identity construction.

This interview data was intersected with observation of internal community interactions and documentary analysis in order to contribute to the ‘ecological validity’ of the data (Bryman, 2001: 31). The archival research was both of internal Irish–Jewish documents at the Irish Jewish Museum (towards which I adopted a critical approach), as well as documentary analysis of how the Irish, Israeli and Jewish media covered the events of the day.

The final part of my research was participant observation conducted among a group of young (20–35 years old) Irish and international Jews on the day of the match as we assembled in a pub in town, attended a demonstration outside the Israeli embassy near Lansdowne Road, and then went to the match. While the initial suggestion for assembling a group of Irish Jews to watch the match came from myself and I was open with my role as a participant observer within the group, the gathering on the day owed little to my efforts.

The actual convening of the group was done partly through the Jewish Society in Trinity College Dublin, and partly through informal networking. This was a group self-selected by members’ common interest in socialising with other Jews rather than in football – some didn’t even go to the match. While this group can be considered reasonably representative of young Jews in Ireland, the high proportion of foreign Jews in the group attenuated the extent to which they were ‘Irish Jews’. As with the interviews, my aim was to investigate the discursive production of identities. This was a useful site for doing so, not simply because of the size of the sample, a fluctuating group of more than a dozen people but also because the events of the day stimulated members of the group to reflect on their identity and the role of Israel.

No longer a 'peculiarly peculiar people'?

Following Brubaker and Cooper, it seems more useful to study the processes of identification than to deploy or accept the nebulous concept of 'identity' – either as a reified thing which the 'pure subject' cunningly deploys, or as an innate part of the 'true self' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). This formulation enables us to ask what is happening when people invoke Jewish identity and specifically when people link that identity to Zionism.

The 1,800 Jews in Ireland (most living in Dublin), while largely middle class, are a heterogeneous and divided group and thus the very idea of a unitary Irish-Jewish community is problematic. We can understand the use of the term 'the Irish-Jewish community' as being in part an identitarian claim – that there is an ethnic commonality underpinning the heterogeneous group of people who identify themselves as Jews. However, Irish Jewry is also a community of real social relations (Rivlin, 2003), based around families that have known each other for years, and as such accords very closely with older definitions of community: a group of households in the same area with strong links of functional interdependencies and which are bound by their need to assure communal survival (Elias, 1974). These two notions of community – the ethnic and the consociational – overlap, but are not equivalent. On the contrary, the ethnic definition of 'the Jewish community' allows its members to veil the extent it is and is not a community of social relations. It also allows the construction of a historical narrative of Irish Jewry, within which Jews in Ireland can construct their Jewishness.

Within this narrative, the present Irish Jewish community is seen as deriving from Eastern European immigrants who arrived in Ireland around the turn of the last century. This mythical beginning allows not only the formation of a common Jewish identity – linking Irish Jews with tales of Jewish exile, but a common *Irish* Jewish one, which is underlined through the common claim that most Irish Jews do not merely come from Lithuania, but from the small township of Akmijan – again dubiously accurate but narratively powerful. (Lentin and McVeigh, 2006: 119)

The centrality of ethnicity in the construction of a Jewish collectivity and its 'interests' has served to create a strong emphasis on issues of boundary control and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 1997) and in the past has strengthened the feeling that Jews were a people apart. This creation of Irish Jews as a 'peculiarly peculiar people' (Edward Lipsett, quoted in Hyman, 1972: 176) was not one-way; the manner in which Irish identity traditionally has been articulated around religion and land has the effect of excluding Jews and Jewishness from its narrative (Lentin, 2002). Thus, implicit in many older Jewish accounts of life in Ireland is the sense of distance between Jews and other Irish people, a distance underlined less in claims of antisemitism (which Irish Jews, in common with other small Jewish communities, tended to underplay) than in the repeated declaration along the lines of 'we never experienced any problems here' (For example: Harris, 2002: 49, 55; Rosenblatt, 2005: 15, 51, 57; Louis Wigoder in Ó Gráda, 2005).

However, these earlier narratives of difference are increasingly being displaced by a sense of belonging, often expressed by distinguishing Jews from newer immigrants (Lentin, 2004). According to one interviewee: ‘I don’t feel any different to any other Irishman ... I’m as Irish as anybody else. Probably more so because, em, we’re fifth generation Irish. Plenty people out there aren’t’.

The process through which Jews in America have been increasingly seen as white (Brodkin, 1998) has been paralleled in Ireland. The Jewish experience in Dublin is being woven into narratives of a bygone Dublin (for example Carter, 2000; Russell, 2004), and the non-threatening miniscule Jewish community celebrated by such rightwing guardians of Irishness as Michael McDowell and Aine ní Chonaill (Lentin, 2004; Ní Chonaill, 2005). This recent relative openness towards Jews has undermined the sense of belonging to a closed ‘special’ community, and has given voice to those Irish Jews willing to assert themselves in the public domain – as expressed in the polemical Irish–Jewish magazine *The Jewish Voice*:

Surely we must – as equal citizens – be entitled to air our point of view?
How can we expect people to empathise with us while we continue to veil ourselves with mystery so that they always retain their preconception of what a Jew should be?¹

An important battle in this regard was fought in the 1990s on how to deal with attacks on Israel – the traditional response of lying low and letting community representatives quietly appeal to the authorities was rejected in favour of responding publicly. When I asked about the former stance towards the media, the PRO of the Jewish Representative Council dismissed the approach as deriving from a no longer relevant ghetto mentality: ‘I think the more modern approach is “look I’m an Irish citizen, I’m an American citizen, whatever and I’ve as much right to speak out for my rights as anybody else – and by God I’m going to do it”.’

The role of Zionism

This is a significant statement, indicating that the willingness to stand up publicly for Israel is not so much a case of Irish Jews bowing to Israel’s demands, but a means by which they can express a conception of Irish–Jewish identity which is based on their having ‘as much right’ in Ireland as anyone else. The historical changes within this identity has in many ways served to strengthen the position of Zionism as a signifier of Jewishness in Ireland, and a means that allows Irish Jews to express both their Jewish *and* Irish identities.

Much of the literature on Jewish identity has not problematised identity sufficiently, with most studies being more quantitative – efforts to measure ‘how much’ Jewish identity there is – than qualitative attempts to examine the process of Jewish identity formation (Solomon, 1994; Davidman, 2003). In particular, the role of Zionism has been insufficiently examined, despite the strong historical

roots of Jewish opposition to Zionism (Rabkin, 2006) and the growing number of Israel-critical diaspora Jews (Rosenthal, 2003, for a recent example: Independent Jewish Voices 2007). Most work on Jewish life in the diaspora simply assumes an innate link between Zionism and Jewishness.

This refusal to problematise Zionism can be seen as a function of its use as a boundary marker of Jewishness. Partly due to the attenuation of 'everyday Jewishness', which has led to the decline of previous boundary markers such as separate foodways and a distinct language, Zionism has become one of the few things which links an increasingly diverse group of Jews in Ireland, allowing them to sustain both the narratives and practical operations of community. Indeed, almost all community organisations outside the synagogue are Zionist, either explicitly, like the Jewish National Fund (JNF, the purpose of which, in the diaspora, is to raise funds for a variety of Israeli causes), or implicitly, like The Hebrew Speakers' Circle (the purpose of which is cultural and linguistic).

Irish Zionism should be seen as a set of modifiable beliefs and actions themed around a supportive relationship with Israel, rather than a concrete thing – a process not an object. The first aspect of this Zionism is that it is eminently a social affair – throughout the Diaspora 'the issue of Israel is frequently a valid excuse for Jewish gatherings ... a good way to bring together Jews' (Beilin, 2000: 39). This is not to deny Zionism's self-evident political nature, but to point out that *within* the community, the social aspect of Zionism – seen as a melange of awareness raising and charitable events – stands out.

Yet Zionism does not merely offer Jews a chance to be with Jews, but an opportunity to claim their Jewishness. After studying Armenians in London, a group bound together by very little except consciousness of being Armenian, Vered Amit concluded: 'Primordialism and essentialism are not haphazard or occasional features of the effort to reproduce diasporas as ideological vehicles of identity. They are fundamental to this process' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 54). While the Irish Jewish community is somewhat less fractured than the London Armenian one, it too relies on such essentialism to assert its claims of shared identity, an essentialism grounded in the belief of belonging to an international Jewish People. The need of this small and relatively isolated community to reaffirm itself through international links is at least a partial explanation for its traditionally staunch Zionism. For Zionism can be seen as one of these links, Israel being the opportunity to express a sense of loyalty and belonging to the international Jewish community.

Explicit Zionist activity centrally contributes to the enacted narratives of the Irish-Jewish community and is a means of structuring Jewish life in Ireland; thus Irish Zionism should be seen as an ongoing process based in Ireland, rather than a destination which ends in Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. Support of Israel should not be seen as a wish to live there or even as an affinity with the place (for instance, my Irish-born interviewees expressed either neutrality or even mild hostility towards Israelis, seen as clearly alien), but rather a means – however inherently problematic – of forwarding an Irish-based sense of diasporic Jewish identity, and of ensuring Irish Jewish continuity (Landy, 2005).

By providing practical effect to the narrative of a unitary Jewish community, Zionism is in part a survival mechanism – a facet of its nature which gives Zionism an ever-increasing significance. For within this fractured ‘community’ with a bitter history of internal divisions it is fair to say that Zionist organisations and events are genuinely cross-communal – encompassing Jews from both the Progressive and Orthodox synagogues.² Zionism is seen as a force for unity and for many of the respondents in my study it is the clearest boundary marker of Jewishness. According to one:

We have many internal debates in our own community, many differences of opinion, but when it comes to supporting Israel, people are almost unanimous. In fact, I don’t know anyone who doesn’t support Israel ... There may be one or two people who have strange ideas, but by and large, as a Jew you support the State of Israel.

The planting of trees in Israel, an activity organised by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), encapsulates many of the diverse aspects of Irish Zionism. Irish Jews themselves do not go over and plant the trees, but donate money towards their planting and so this activity allows Irish Jews to display their primordial link with the land of Israel while remaining in Ireland. It also underlines the charity-nature of traditional Zionism. In addition tree-planting performs the social aspect of Zionism, since people do not usually plant trees for themselves but give them as presents to relatives and friends. *Nachlath Dublin* – the yearly magazine of the JNF – publishes annual lists of tree givers, making these relationships public and scrutinisable by others – and so we have Zionism in its aspect of exhibiting and fostering social relations within the community.

Zionism’s centrality in Irish Jewish life, its role in unifying the community and providing a concrete link with other Jews make people unwilling to debate it, since such debate may open divisions which the community can no longer afford. By refusing to discuss Israel, but merely demanding that it be defended, it appears that it is a very weak form of ethnic identity that is being protected, a virtually contentless one. For the symbolic forms which a community uses to define itself are not interchangeable; Kalchik refers to how these forms ‘are not merely strategies of distinctiveness ... they are also strategies for communication’ (Kalchik, 1984: 46). In fact, the more they communicate within the society, the greater effect they will have in creating a distinct ethnicity. While language and foodways are an especially rich way of communicating and of structuring everyday life (Diner, 2001), Zionism, as it has been interpreted, appears to be a peculiarly empty symbol, involving little more than a self-referential belief in the right to support Israel.

Such emptiness allows people to avoid internal conflict; more significantly it also allows ‘Zionism’ to be filled up with each individual’s interpretations of what Zionism means. This process facilitates the shift among Irish Jews from old-style community identity towards more modern type of symbolic ethnicity based on

tenuous links and symbols. This is in line with the affective and symbolic identity adopted by other diaspora Jewish communities (Buckser, 2000).

'Oh yeah, this dual-loyalties thing'

The claim that Irish Jews express not only their Jewishness, but also their sense of Irishness by supporting Israel may seem paradoxical. However, in America it has been remarked that the more Jews felt they belonged, the more ready they were to assert their Jewishness, part of which is support for Israel (Waxman, 1999). Indeed, under the terms of American multiculturalism, their ethnicity is emphasised as a means of being American. Needless to say, American concepts of multiculturalism do not directly translate to Ireland, where the nation was traditionally viewed as a homogeneous entity.

While in Ireland, attempts to create a pluralist Irish identity have been given impetus by the large-scale immigration of the last decade, this has been subsumed under the dominant ideology of state-sponsored interculturalism (Lentin and McVeigh, 2006). Under the terms of this 'weak multiculturalism' (Fanning, 2002) structural racism remains unexamined, and instead the focus is put on a positive portrayal of minority cultures, seen as 'Other'. This fits into what Stuart Hall labels 'corporate multiculturalism', the public/private ideology which seeks to manage ethnic minorities for the benefits of the centre (Hall, 2000). While state-sponsored intercultural projects do not centrally affect the lives of the long-established economically integrated Jewish community in Ireland, the emphasis that weak multiculturalism places on celebrating cultural differences has affected their position in Ireland.

'Celebratory multiculturalism', seen as 'part of a more liberal version of the heritage industry' (Bhattacharyya, 1998: 260) has come under severe criticism. This form, also termed ludic multiculturalism, has been lambasted as being a top-down way of coping with multi-cultural realities, one which deliberately refuses to engage with the power imbalance that minoritised people face (Matustik, 1998). Some authors go further and point out that the cultural reification that such multiculturalism entails provides a language through which racial codes can operate (Gilroy, 2002) and often forces multiculturalised subjects to adopt a static identity imposed from outside – what place is there within such multiculturalism, Alibhai-Brown asks, for a Jamaican who can't stand reggae music (Alibhai-Brown, 2000).

However, while celebratory multiculturalism may reify minoritised people and is hardly the most useful means of achieving equal status for those in a disadvantaged socio-economic position, for already well-integrated Irish Jews it appears to provide a means through which it is tenable to narrate their Irishness by asserting their Jewishness. (However, for the pitfalls this involves for European Jews, see Gruber 2002.)

While it is tenable to argue that the Ireland-Israel match provided a site for celebratory multiculturalism for Irish Jews, they first had to deal with a media-led



From proclaiming loyalty ... to multicultural Irish-Jewish identity?

(Photo at the Irish Jewish Museum)



expectation that they should agonise over taking sides at the match (Millar, 2005). In fact, two separate interviewees related with irritation how newspapers contacted them for a 'split-loyalties' story, an example of how Irish Jews have to cope with an identity frequently overdetermined from outside. In passing it should be noted that this pre-scripted idea of 'double loyalty' has had more serious consequences in the past, with Irish Jews not allowed into Ireland during and after the Second World War because of that supposed 'dual loyalty' (Keogh, 1998).

Such pressure to declare sides did not only come from the media – the only Israeli in the group going to the match was annoyed by the presence of Ireland supporters since the tickets, obtained via Israeli officials, were supposed to be only for supporters of Israel. This is a neat example of how Irish Zionists manage to manipulate the link with Israel as well as an indicator of the tensions that flow from doing so.

Nevertheless, the choice of which football team to support was hardly a matter of anguished decision-making for Jews in Ireland, partly because none seemed to take football seriously. One interviewee's dismissive response to the match: 'Oh yeah, this dual-loyalties thing', demonstrates how Irish Jews casually batted away the implied loyalty test. Another interviewee joked about how she was chatting to her mother for about five minutes about the match, both expressing disappointment that 'we' hadn't won, before they both realised that 'we' meant different teams. This story was not merely told to illustrate the speaker's belief that a variety of responses to the match was acceptable – the telling of it as a joke underlined the question's perceived unimportance.

Among the group going to the game, some supported Ireland, some Israel – the choice of who to support was not considered particularly important – indeed several said they weren't really supporting either team. Nor can support be correlated to a Zionist worldview – one vocal supporter of the Irish team was at the same time eager to perform his Zionism by searching for pro-Palestinian demonstrators to argue with, and exhibiting his Israeli army dogtags to others in the group.

While multiple allegiances may not be a problem for Irish Jews, they recognise that it is sometimes an issue with non-Jews. One interviewee spoke of her suggestion for a WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organisation) fundraiser, where they would show the match and attendees could support whatever team they wanted. WIZO turned the idea down, worried that the image of Irish Jews supporting different teams would be too controversial – an illustration of the clash between those believing a discrete Jewish community needs to be discreet, and those more comfortable with displaying and playing with elements of their Irish-Jewish identity.

Despite some efforts by non-Jews to pigeonhole Irish Jews, and perhaps by Israelis to expect loyalty to their team, it would initially seem that the confidence and sense of belonging of Irish Jews has enabled them to deflect or deflate imputed loyalty questions. In fact, by using the match as an opportunity to play with multiple identities rather than a crucible in which to be traumatised by split loyalties, Irish Jews appear to be ideal multicultural subjects who express their otherness in a non-threatening way and with proper regard for the national framework (Alibhai-Brown, 2000; Koopmans and Statham, 2000). However, this is only half the story, the other half involves the tensions that flow from Irish Jewish assumptions of Zionism and the responsibilities that involves.

Interpreting the challenge of Palestinian solidarity

The match-day had a political content that went beyond the symbolic confrontation of national teams, owing to the successful manner in which the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) turned the day into a mobilisation for Palestinian rights. They did this through a demonstration in town before the match involving some 500–1500 people (O'Halloran, 2005; Indymedia, 2005), by protesting outside the Israeli embassy, and by handing out thousands of paper Palestinian flags and leaflets to supporters on their way to the match.



IPSC poster

Many Irish Jews felt the need to respond to this mobilisation. While the demands of Irish Zionism may not be particularly onerous in terms of day-to-day conduct, its centrality in identity production ensures that manifestations of pro-Palestinian activity are seen as being 'anti-Zionist' – something which not only threatens Israel, but Irish Jews themselves. Several of my interviewees claimed that the existence of Israel is necessary for the continuance of Irish Jews. To 'stand up for Israel', one interviewee stated, was intrinsically linked with the right and the opportunity to feel comfortable in Ireland as an Irish Jew.

As Israeli atrocities mount, standing up for Israel has become increasingly difficult. One interviewee

recounted how she dreads the experience, when relaxing in the very Irish setting of a pub of someone finding out she is Jewish and confronting her with anti-Israeli polemic. Another, when asked if he felt alienated by criticism of Israel replied happily, ‘No, my non-Jewish friends don’t really mention Israel or connect me with Israel’. This was perhaps being realistic; the most positive thing Zionists can expect in Ireland is simply that Israel is not discussed. This has meant that Irish Jews tend to view Ireland in general and the media in particular as having an anti-Israeli bias (for example, Miller, 2005).

Understanding Israel’s unpopularity within the terms of their own Zionism often forces Irish Jews to rely upon the narrative of antisemitism to explain it. This is not confined to Irish Jews; the characterisation of critics of Israel as antisemitic is common within Zionist circles, an accusation increasingly deployed as Israeli actions become in themselves less easy to support (Bourne, 2004).

Thus, both the British-based *Jewish Telegraph* and the Israeli press characterised the IPSC protest as antisemitic – witness the *Jewish Telegraph* headlines: ‘Jihad in Dublin’: ‘IRA targets Israel fans’ (*Jewish Telegraph*, 2003a, b) or the article and doctored picture in the Israeli daily, *Yedioth Aharonot* (Shalev, 2005). While such a depiction was, from my own and other eyewitnesses’ experience of the protest, not only inaccurate but at times toppling over into parody (*Jewish Telegraph*, 2005c), a mainstream British newspaper also linked pro-Palestinian protests with a spate of antisemitic defacing of Irish Jewish institutions (Millar, 2005). In this, the journalist was simply repeating Irish-Jewish claims that the antisemitic attacks on Jewish buildings were motivated by anti-Zionism (Downes, 2004).

Crucial to this labelling was the discursive absence of Palestinians themselves; among my group, ‘Palestinians’ were only mentioned once. The group was not shy of discussing the pro-Palestinian protest, but the absence of Palestinians – considered as subjects – meant that the protestors were not seen as pro-Palestinian but rather anti-Israeli. Their actions, thus interpreted, were put down to either stupidity and/or antisemitism. The only time I heard Palestinians mentioned among the group was as follows: ‘the problem isn’t the Palestinians; it’s the people who stir them up like Sue Blackwell’.³ The idea that the Palestinian natives would remain quiescent were it not for meddling English academics, while an absurd colonial conceit, is also



Picture accompanying
Yedioth Aharonot article

a useful rhetorical trope which enables the symbols of Palestine to be reconstituted as no more than signifiers of leftwing, European-based antisemitism. Such willingness to label people’s actions as antisemitic also fits in with the Zionist conception of a hostile Gentile world and enables Irish Jews to bury any misgivings they may feel about Israel.

Ironically, while the IPSC-organised event was not antisemitic, the football

match itself was marred by some ugly antisemitic incidents by Irish supporters. While there was disagreement later among Irish football fans as to the extent and seriousness of the incidents – are chants of ‘where’s your foreskin, then’ actually antisemitic or simply instances of good-natured haranguing – enough instances of anti-Jewish abuse were evident to show that something disturbing was happening (foot.ie, 2005a, 2005b). The Irish supporters who complained about the behaviour did not claim it was motivated by Jew-hatred, more that the Israel match offered ‘Celtic-shirt wearing scumbags’ an opportunity to perform their hooliganism (foot.ie, 2005a). These attacks, with or without political content, were characterised as being motivated by thuggishness and ignorance:

While personally trying to draw a veil over this whole sickening episode, I think the political savvy of the majority of those who saw fit to wave colours other than our own at a home game is summed up by the following statement from the upper east:

Stadium Announcer : ‘Ladies & gentlemen, the National anthem of Israel’ *Peanut-headed white shirt & tracksuit wearing skanger wrapped in palestinian flag*: ‘F*ck off back to killing kids yez F*ckin B*stard Nazis.’ (Foot.ie, 2005a)

What is interesting is how accounts of antisemitism at the match were downplayed by Irish Jews. Several members of the Shalom Ireland website – a website for Irish-born Jews in Ireland and abroad – dismissed the idea that antisemitism at the match was in any way significant and reacted angrily to the comment placed by one Irish-born Israeli resident that he was ashamed to be Irish (Shalom Ireland, 2005). Such an underplaying – also evident in my interviewees’ non-discussion of these incidents – may stem from not having to directly confront them; unlike the supporters in the Irish stands we could neither hear any shouts from the Irish stands, nor were any Nazi salutes noticed.

In broader terms, the perception of the antisemites as ‘skangers’ – i.e. semi-criminal working class Dubliners – offers a clue as to why their actions were ignored. If at least one of the purpose of multiculturalism is the call for recognition and seeking acceptance (Taylor, 1994), it seems reasonable that Jews, considering themselves Irish, aren’t seeking acceptance from, and are not worried at, how this subordinate social group perceives them.

What Irish Jews had to confront was something on a different level – pro-Palestinian demonstrators and a sympathetic Irish media (Bowen, 2005; Humphries 2005); so it is not surprising that they located antisemitism in this arena even if it was not actually performed there. While antisemites may hold beliefs about Jews as Christ-killers or misers, what Jews are more usually confronted with today is anti-Zionist criticism. That this may only be rarely linked with an antisemitic attitude is, for the Jews thus confronted, somewhat irrelevant. As one interviewee stated: ‘Antisemitism today, in my view, comes from the political Left and Islam’

– namely those who are seen as criticising Israel. Leaving aside for the moment the way fears of antisemitism/anti-Zionism are creating a distance between Jews and Muslims in Ireland, it was significant that almost all my interviewees raised the issue of antisemitism in the context of Israel, with several believing it to be a worse problem than ever.

This is a common theme in contemporary Jewish thinking – an increasing number of American Jews believe antisemitism to be a serious problem despite surveys showing that attitudinal antisemitism in America, as in Ireland, has been in steady decline (Chanes, 1999; Mac Gréil 1996). While antisemitism may not have increased, the dangers to Jewishness certainly have – in Ireland, America and across the diaspora. That these dangers come from assimilation and intermarriage rather than antisemitism makes them no less a threat to Jewish identity and continuity. Seeing the identification of antisemitism as surrogate to wider fears about an encroaching non-Jewish world may help account for the growing importance attached to antisemitism by Jews.

Specific to the match it is easy to see how insecurity at being surrounded by a sea of anti-Israelis (or Palestinian supporters) becomes transformed into fears of antisemitism; while the day proved an enjoyable social occasion, this did not prevent many in the group I was with from expressing worries about suicide bombers and antisemitic pro-Palestinian rioters. Expressing these fears created a level of group solidarity and thus can be seen as contributing to the social occasion. This is not to dismiss these fears – they may have been outlandish, but were no less real for that.

Conclusion: Placing Jews in Ireland

Interpreting pro-Palestinian activism as antisemitic may leave Irish Jews' Zionism intact, but does not place them in a comfortable situation. This is firstly manifest in the way it distances them from many new immigrants, namely Muslims. While several of my interviewees expressed a sense of sympathy towards immigrants, when it came to Muslims this became antipathy when one respondent claimed Muslims were less integrated into Ireland than other immigrants, and so 'there's always a question mark'. This attitude towards Muslims appears to be a new element in Irish-Jewish discourse, one which is not confined to discussions of the Middle East, but also expressed in fears of Muslim immigration to Ireland.⁴

More widely, there is a sense in which Irish Jews feel abandoned by those elements of Irish identity which many would choose to belong to. Whatever about the implausibility of belonging to a Gaelic-Catholic-Rural Ireland, my research suggests that a 'Dublin 4' identity – socially liberal, post-nationalist, economically conservative, and resolutely urban – would be a comfortable one for many Jews. However Israel, or rather 'anti-Israel bias' is seen as an increasing barrier to their entry to this otherwise congenial identity. This somewhat poignant situation is expressed by the following piece about feeling alienated by *The Irish Times*:

The dilemma is a cruel one. *The Irish Times's* stand on Israel may deeply offend us at times, but there is no other daily which so corresponds to the opinions of the majority of the Jewish community, on political topics such as racism and the far-right and on social issues such as divorce and abortion.⁵

This problem is analogous to the distress some English Jews feel about *The Guardian's* coverage of the Middle East (Baram, 2004). It is not simply a case of disagreeing with reporters, more of being excluded from a club one would like to belong to.

For many Jews I interviewed, any distancing from the liberal left was counter-balanced with an appreciation that Irish Christian groups, including both Catholics and Protestants, had become staunch supporters of Israel. This support can be placed within the growth of Christian Zionism worldwide (Ateek et al., 2005). However, this is not a symmetrical process; any distance from 'liberal Ireland' can not be simply seen as being balanced out by a corresponding closeness with 'Christian Ireland'. These two groups express a different view of Irish identity and the place of Jews within it. The liberal view, being one of inclusiveness (albeit often within a problematic 'weak multicultural' framework), allows Jews the possibility of integrating into a postmodern Irish identity, seen as multiple. The Christian view, on the contrary, promotes the idea that Jews are a 'special people', and thus their philosemitic enthusiasm for Israel fails to conceal, and indeed may at times be based on a belief in the essential alienness of Irish Jews.

The confusing demonstration outside the Israeli embassy where pro-Palestinian demonstrators mingled with pro-Israeli ones, offered me an opportunity to study how both sides tried to symbolise the affinity of their respective ideologies with 'real' Irishness by, at times literally, wrapping themselves in the Irish flag. The claim that IPSC protestors were trying to represent normative Irishness as being pro-Palestinian seems justified in view of their deployment of Irish flags, a tactic legitimised by the proliferation of flags on the day, but still not one commonly used in left-wing demonstrations in Ireland. For Jews this claim – by not recognising pro-Israelis as properly Irish – directly attacked them and their identity and pushed them into associating with the Christian Zionists.⁶ Nevertheless, it is significant that there was virtually no interaction between the group I was with and the flag-waving Christian Zionists at the demonstration. This was partly due to the worry that some of these Christians are, as a group member put it, 'a bit touched', but also to wariness among Jews of the wider allosemitic motivations driving Christian Zionists.

These tensions on the day of the match illustrate one of the limitations of the ideology of celebratory multiculturalism. Such multiculturalism seems to be based on an understanding that only works once we don't mention the real conflicts which the assumptions of separate identities with their accompanying and sometimes opposing loyalties thrust upon us. While this ideology may be able to encompass and indeed celebrate ersatz conflicts such as a football match, we must question



Flags outside the Israeli embassy

how far it is capable of promoting real dialogue and addressing more substantive political differences.

It also points to the problems that follow from using Israel as the cornerstone in the process of constructing a diasporic Jewish identity. For many Jews, Israel is seen less as an actually existent social and political entity and more as a semi-mystical ideal, a means to ground their narrative identity in an essentialist concept of the Jewish people. Seeing Israel as an almost transcendent concept – a manifestation of Jewishness – allows Irish Jews to maintain a distance from the grim realities of Israel/Palestine as well as making their Zionism impervious to fact-based criticism.

Nevertheless Israel is an actually existing place, one whose repression of Palestinians is provoking increasing condemnation. Through the rhetorical means of divorcing this criticism from the actual conditions which Palestinians face, Irish Jews are enabled to, or perhaps one should say, are trapped into labelling this criticism as antisemitic. There is an undeniable logic in so labelling it, in that it does challenge a central aspect of their identity. As with all socially-constructed experiences, Jews should not be seen as suffering antisemitism as passive victims, but experiencing it as subjects and interpreting it through the means of their narrative identity.

This does not mean that Jews are making up antisemitism, but that the relationship between antisemitic actions and effects are not direct. While antisemitic attacks do occur in Ireland, albeit infrequently, conflating anti-Zionism with



Graffiti on the Irish Jewish museum, 2005

antisemitism creates a tendency to misrecognise these attacks. This can be seen in relation to the spate of antisemitic graffiti on Jewish public buildings in 2004–5 – all Irish Jews I spoke to were of the completely inaccurate opinion that this was the work of anti-Zionists, with many worried that new immigrants were involved.⁷

More generally the belief that anti-Zionism is a facet of antisemitism enlarges the role that antisemitism plays in defining Irish Jewish identity. Thus, while Jewish people may see Zionism as a process through which they can express their multicultural Irishness, the attitude that other Irish people have towards Israel indicates that it is not a particularly effective way of doing so. It has both promoted the distancing of Jews from those elements within Irish society which they might in other circumstances feel closer to, such as the pluralist left – while drawing them nearer other elements, such as religious Christians, most likely to view Jews as different. In other words, the logic of Zionism, by reinscribing Jewish difference and disconnecting Jews from other immigrants and from other sources of Irish pluralism, may be ascribing them a place within Ireland's political framework where they might not particularly wish to be.

Notes

1 *Jewish Voice*, 5 (1) 1997: 12.

2 Orthodox Jews are religiously traditional Jews. In Ireland they form a majority of the Jewish population and have a synagogue in Terenure. Progressive Jews have more liberal beliefs about religious observation. Their synagogue, also in Dublin, was founded 60 years ago.

3 Sue Blackwell is a university lecturer in Birmingham publicly associated with efforts to boycott Israeli universities

- 4 For instance the *Nachlath Dublin* 2004–5 editorial recycles classic anti-Islamic discourses by questioning Islam's authenticity, as well as adding new ones with the claim that Islamic fundamentalists are now trying to achieve their ends through Muslim immigration.
- 5 *Jewish Voice*, 4 (1) 1996: 7.
- 6 One Irish Jew who was arguing with the pro-Palestinian demonstrators, later reported that one of them refused to recognise that he was Irish, and even when he confirmed that he was, his Irishness continued to be called into question
- 7 The person responsible was later caught and found to be a long-term unemployed Irish-born man from Co. Louth who didn't like Jews, acting on his own. ('Swastika graffiti racist is arrested', *Evening Herald*, 24 June 2005.)

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